

To the Honorable members of the House Education Committee, June 11, 2009

"NO" to HB 4787-4789 School Takeover Package/ Charter School Expansion

I am a member of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers- Michigan, which co-sponsored a rally and meetings beginning in Cobo Hall on Tuesday 5/26/09. I also represent Social Activists for Change for Children (SACC), a coalition of DFT members (teachers-school social workers-supporters) in Detroit, formed in January, 2002, partially in response to the Detroit Public Schools layoffs of school support service personnel. I am a Licensed Master of Social Worker (LMSW); a member of Region D of the Michigan Association of School Social Workers (MASSW-D); and a member of the Michigan National Association of Social Workers (NASW). Finally I am a father of two children aged 18 and 16. My older child just graduated from high school and the younger is still enrolled in Plymouth-Canton Community Schools (PCCS).

Much has happened in the last few weeks in the turnaround school/ educational management organization (EMO) charter school expansion debate since the Honorable Reps. T. Melton and B. Johnson introduced the HB 4787-4789 package on April 2, 2009. However, what seems to have been missed is the significance of the joint Editorial Statement co-authored by:

- ◆ **Randi Weingarten**, President, American Federation of Teachers
- ◆ **Robert Bobb**, Emergency Financial Manager, Detroit Public Schools
- ◆ **Keith Johnson**, President, Detroit Federation of Teachers
- ◆ **Barbara Byrd-Bennett**, Chief Academic Officer, Detroit Public Schools
- ◆ **David Hecker**, President, AFT Michigan

**As published in the Detroit News on 6/8/09, the Statement asks critics to allow the reform process in which "seven-thousand teachers, paraprofessionals and other school staff came together with their unions and leaders of the Detroit Public Schools to talk about how we will work together to improve teaching and learning, so every child has a chance to succeed" to continue.** <sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, or in spite of the 5/26/09 meetings/ rally, this Legislative Committee seems to be in a rush to pass House Bills 4787-4789. The Hon. Reps. Melton & Johnson, co-authors of HB4787-4789, appear willing, if not eager, to allow unregulated, unaccountable EMOs and charter schools free rein to infest large public school districts, such as Detroit, and undermine the efforts of those districts to establish viable and effective public school reforms. It simply makes no sense to "throw out" a public education system (where 90% of all K-12 education takes place) at a time of a state budget crisis, in order to subsidize the quasi-public/ private charter school industry; an

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.detnews.com/article/20090608/OPINION01/906080305/-1/ARCHIVE/Union-is-an-ally-in-restoring-schools>

industry whose track record of success is at best doubtful and in many cases far below that of the public school system.

I work in a public school as a school social worker in the Detroit Public Schools. I, as well as my colleagues, often see children and parents who left DPS to try a charter school, only to return dissatisfied. The charters did not measure up to their marketing claims, leaving the children they sought to educate well behind the children who remained in the public schools in both reading and math. Recent data in the Detroit Free Press, which compared Michigan charters to the public schools in the local districts where the charters operated, showed no significant gains in achievement between Public Education and charters. In charter schools, teachers generally are poorly prepared, and many lack the certification and experience needed to teach effectively. In the area of child development and meeting children's emotional and social needs, services such as special education, which the public sector is mandated to provide, are not provided by charters. Once charters receive their per-child subsidy from the state, they expel or transfer to public schools those children with emotional, behavioral, or learning problems. This practice, commonly called "cherry-picking", creates an "un-level playing field" for those who seek to compare the results achieved by charter schools with those achieved by public schools. Public schools are mandated to take all children returning from charters back and help them as much as possible. In doing so we who work in the public schools see that these children have actually have fallen behind their peers academically, behaviorally, and developmentally while they were in the charters.

Historically, public education in our society has been and continues to be the primary democratizing institution for social groups seeking to achieve the "American dream" by preparing their children for economic success and the responsibilities of citizenship in our pluralistic democracy. Started under the banner of "education reform" in 1993-94, public charter schools have come at a high cost, since they have contributed greatly to the erosion of funding for public school systems. When charter school academies compete with public schools, these academies divert the per pupil foundation allowance from the neediest school systems. Charter school expansion in and around the state's poorest urban areas is draining badly needed financial resources from our public schools, without providing the promised benefits to all the children they seek to serve. Clearly the answer to the problems of public education in the poorest areas of the state includes adequate provision of funding for lowering class size and achieving lower teacher / student ratios (a well established method for increasing student academic success); supporting drop-out prevention programs, and serving the special needs of all students, including those with disabilities. When charters drain money from public schools, it becomes difficult, if not impossible for public schools to implement proven programs and strategies, like the Charlotte/ Mecklenburg model. The answer is not to further eviscerate public education!

Under the guise of "choice" and "turnaround" (the newest buzzwords) students and families of Michigan are about to be fleeced. Supporters of charters seem to have only the minimum regard for logical and reasoned public policy. My experience as a parent of two school children in Canton is that parents simply want their local schools to be safe, accountable, responsive and effective. They want quality education from their local public schools, which are within walking distance from their homes, such as what my children received at an NCA accredited school. The concerned parents, like those I

interact with at our local Parent Teacher Organizations (PTO) or those who participate in Local School Community Organizations (LSCOs) are not interested in charters per se. They want the basic conditions for a quality education to be met by the schools their children attend, and they want to support and enhance the resources for local public education, not destroy the existing public education system!

Please say NO to HB 4787-4789 and other efforts to expand charter schools. Rushing to make such a decision on a wave of rhetoric and based on emotional arguments that are unsupported by well researched and fully analyzed data is neither in the best interest of our children or of our great state, which has a well-established public education system that has much to commend it and which is fixable by efforts that are already well under way by school districts that have sought the creative input and experience of school administrators, teachers, and parents!

Our legislature should have time to take account of important input from those on the front lines of our educational system – not rush to judgment before fully considering what they have to add to the deliberations and debate of this issue. But, by holding these hearings during the last week of school, when most teachers and support staff are unable to attend, you rob this legislative body of the chance to fully consider all aspects of this important issue.

I urge members of the House Education Committee to consider the deleterious potential effects of further charter school expansion upon already burdened public school systems. Please allow the current process of reform initiated on 5/26/09 in Detroit to work. Thank you.

-Leonard T. Zabawski, LMSW Canton, MI  
44043 Vassar  
Canton, MI 48188-1032  
(734) 981-4365  
[LAJKONIK11@msn.com](mailto:LAJKONIK11@msn.com)

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